



# PUBLIC OPINION AND POLICY DURING THE GLOBAL WAR ON TERROR

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## ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to investigate the extent to which public opinion affected policy-making during the Global War on Terror. Over the years since September 11th, many policies, both popular and unpopular, were made in response to this devastating attack against the American people on their own soil, with approval of such policies fluctuating regularly. According to conventional wisdom, how the government of the United States is set up should compel the highest amount of receptiveness to public opinion as possible, enabled by the Constitution and so forth, allowing policies regarding the war to be as reflective of public opinion as can be afforded by America's governance system. However, some theorize that there is more afoot, hypothesizing that elite meddling and hardcore lobbying from the military-industrial complex are currently large impediments to government receptiveness towards public opinion during matters regarding the Global War on Terror. Regardless, as research would suggest, the situation is more complex than it appears.

**KEYWORDS:** Public Opinion, Global War on Terror, Policy-Making, Elitism Theory, Counterterrorism Strategies, Democratic Governance

## INTRODUCTION

To what extent did public opinion influence the policy decisions of the American government pertaining to the Global War on Terrorism? Based on pre-existing research, the author concludes that with every occurring terrorist attack, the initial public demand for concrete action in the form of enhanced policy will increase. Such demand will remain within the public subconscious until the responsible entity is definitively defeated. However, it comes with several conditions: Firstly, contrary to what conventional theory might suggest, public opinion does not have unobstructed access to the policy-making process. Secondly, as the war progresses, public support will dwindle as the conflict becomes more protracted, with increased casualties and higher government expenditures. This is also sometimes accompanied by the increase in importance of other, more immediate issues in fields unrelated to war. Thirdly, public opinion itself is subjective—a reflection of the general opinion towards a particular issue. So, in the wider realm of policy, where officials consider facts and data in order to formulate the best policy, although public opinion will in most instances be accounted for, it does not account for one hundred percent of the weight in the policy-making process.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

It is difficult to find methods to measure the impact that public opinion has on policy decisions, especially when ways to quantify such data in this area of study have not been universalized. And with an abundance of uncharted territory, it is challenging for one to find an area of focus, which is where the comprehensive analysis by Burstein (2003) proves helpful; it reviews the extent to which public opinion could influence policy and finds that the "salience," or importance, of certain

issues, increased, so did government responsiveness towards public opinion. Results show that during regular policymaking, such opinions had no impact in a third of all instances reviewed. Whereas, when the issues are of increased salience, not only is public opinion consistently put into consideration, but it was also shown to hold substantial weight in three-fifths of all instances. This strong influence over public policy largely persists despite the passage of time as well as interference from special interests and actually increases as the number of interested organizations mounts, with public opinion being more important 83% of the time in instances with more than one organization involved. When taking into account political parties, public opinion has a significant impact 72 percent of the time, whereas without political parties, public opinion has had a substantial impact 74 percent of the time. Furthermore, Burstein finds that "public opinion is more likely to be of substantial importance when the party balance is included than when it is not—48 percent of the time versus 22 percent" (p. 35). Despite all of the promising research displayed, such results are, unfortunately, unable to be generalized to a global audience, as most research, as acknowledged by the author, has been mostly limited geographically to the United States.<sup>1</sup>

To further bolster some of the claims made in the earlier literature, this paper uses Chan & Safran's (2006) analysis to put into perspective the potential for public opinion as a way to prevent elected officials from encouraging or declaring war by comparing the different responses towards such action from democracies all around the world and argues that the extent to which public opinion can have an effect depends on their respective electoral systems. Initially, the conventional theory suggested that in the context of the United States,

since the presidential election calls for a platform that appeals to a nationwide audience, the candidates in question and the elected President should be “compelled to address national issues.” (p. 142) salient to the populace, notably war. They also acknowledged the “rally-around-the-flag syndrome” (p. 137), a common trend dictating that public support for a conflict surges initially and then diminishes as it becomes protracted over time, with the decrease in support accelerated by negatives such as large casualties and unfavorable economic conditions. However, it was found that elected officials, such as the President, were able to neglect popular sentiment through the way their respective electoral systems operate. It was discovered that in comparison to other countries, the United States’ two-party system was able to reduce the weight of public opinion on war if the opposition party did not propose any significant alternative course of action, as “a vote for an antiwar third party is ‘wasted’”. That is not to say, however, that public opinion holds no influence at all. In fact, the analysis finds that depending on the party balance, as the next election comes closer, the salience of public opinion can increase based on the assumption that politicians will seek to remain in office, or assume office. In conclusion, it mostly depends on the politician’s perception of the public’s voice and whether it is significant to them at certain junctures. The analysis notes that elected officials tend to move quickly for policy adjustments when the momentum of public opinion pushes voters into a position to be utilized by the opposition party, which would cause the eventual loss of an incumbent’s mandate if unpopular policy remains in place.<sup>2</sup>

Mueller & Stewart (2018) examined the relationship between public opinion and policies in counterterrorism, where it was concluded that the government and the elite are in most cases the respondent towards public anxiety instead of its instigators, and that this fear of randomized yet traumatizing attacks seems to perpetuate throughout the years without any signs of significant diminishment. This constant state of alertness and unease was discovered to have been enabled, in part, by routine media coverage of terrorist activity, with an eye towards what *could have been done* instead of the actual events that had unfolded during the attempted plot. This could mean that although the terrorist failed to achieve the objective, what would be displayed to the American public was the plan itself, and of course the *theorized* result, not the reality. This would help to explain as to why public opinion on this matter in a majority of circumstances pushes for tighter security measures, notwithstanding the actual impact such plots have, that is, often ending in failure. However, despite the fact that public pressure is mounting, the authors believe that while officials may express themselves in a manner that shows their empathy with the public, they must ensure that government expenditures reflect only rational thought, not irrational emotions, mentioning that “to be irrational with your own money may be to be foolhardy, [...] But to be irrational with other people’s money, particularly where public safety is concerned, is irresponsible.”<sup>3</sup>

## METHODOLOGY

This study employs a secondary qualitative methodology to analyze the relationship between public opinion and policy-

making during the Global War on Terror. The research relies on a thorough review of academic papers, policy analyses, and government reports to evaluate how public sentiment influenced legislative and military decisions. This approach allows for a comprehensive understanding of pre-existing data while avoiding the logistical challenges of primary data collection. However, the methodology is limited by its reliance on published sources, which may not account for rapidly changing public perspectives or the nuanced motivations of policymakers that are not documented.

## RESULTS & DISCUSSION

### Establishing the Relationship

First, before any further argumentation or presentation of data can be made, it is crucial that the relationship between public opinion and policy within the context of the United States of America is established and that it is proven beyond doubt that public opinion does indeed have an impact on policy. The government, according to the Constitution of the United States, exists to serve the citizens from whom it receives its legitimacy and mandate. In other words, it establishes that the government is directly accountable to the citizenry and is to cater to their needs to the best of their ability through the power vested in them by the Constitution. And, due to the representative nature of the American government, where each electoral district chooses its own representative, it is made possible for the voices of the public to be echoed in the decision-making and policy-making processes. In theory, this allows the government to be “maximally responsive” to public opinion nationwide, implementing effective policies relating to various issues (such as war, as we will later discuss), which is made possible by the feedback provided to them through the elected legislature. However, such responsiveness assumes that the line of communication between the public and the government remains uninterrupted, untouched, and preserved in its purest form without any external influence.

It is well known that, in the modern age, such untampered connection is nigh impossible, with the presence of various interest groups, elites, and many other potential influences. Some, such as those who subscribe to the Elitism Theory might be inclined to believe the “real power,” i.e., the power to influence policy in a democratic society such as that of the United States of America, may in reality be a privilege monopolized by a few elites. This may be true in some circumstances, the most notable examples of which are tax policies that cater to the rich, manifesting mostly in the form of tax cuts that have adverse effects on the economy in the long run; policies that prioritize corporate interests over worker’s rights—as demonstrated by the case in recent memory with Tesla’s union busting—and a sore lack of legislation addressing income and power disparities. Yet, despite these recent happenings, some research has shown that contrary to popular belief, public opinion “is of substantial policy importance at least a third of the time, and probably a fair amount more” (Burstein, 2003, p. 36).

To explain in more concrete terms the extent to which public opinion has an impact on policy, Burstein (2003) reveals that firstly, as the importance of an issue to the wider public

increases, so does government responsiveness towards public opinion during the policy-making process, and that “over half the time when public opinion has any effect—the impact really matters substantively” (p. 34). To put it in simpler terms, in more than 50% of the instances reviewed where public opinion was proven to have had an impact, it was found to have had a “considerable” effect. More specifically, data shows that public opinion is of high importance during policymaking in 64% of the instances reviewed when the importance of issues is considered. In regards to interest groups—organizations that are commonly known to represent more narrow fields of special interests—the results are as follows: as the number of organizations increased, so did the statistical significance of public opinion, climbing up to 83% of the time when multiple organizations were included as part of the equation. As for political parties, which are, contrary to special interest groups, generally considered to be representative of public opinion, data again disproves popular belief, albeit marginally. It shows that public opinion is of “statistical importance 72% of the time” when political parties are involved, and “in studies not including parties, 74%” (p. 35), a difference of plus or minus 2%. A rather more important detail, however, is the sway public opinion has when taking into account the party balance—the balance of power between the two major political parties in American politics, which mostly depends on the firmness of their majority—finding that what the people have to say is of major significance in 48% of instances when considering the stability of the majority that one party holds over the other, in comparison to the 22% of instances when the balance of power is excluded (Burstein, 2003). Finally, the same trends show that when the influence of elites is taken into account, public opinion is still a dominant force in policy considerations, notwithstanding the potential for meddling.

To summarize, the conclusions that can be drawn from Burstein (2003) are: firstly, that as an issue becomes increasingly relevant, and hence gaining importance in the public eye, receptiveness from the government towards public opinion increases along with it, increasing the weight of the public voice during policy considerations, and thereby ensuring that the people’s will is proportionately reflected in legislation and decision-making. Secondly, as the number of interest groups increased, so did the weight of public opinion during policy considerations. This may be because, despite such organizations only representing narrow fields of interest, as the number of organizations mounts, so does the number of perspectives included in the process. However, it is important to note that the author writes to be cautious when interpreting results as done above, but the fact remains that Burstein (2003) does seem to agree that data helps reinforce the idea that interest groups assist in “enhance responsiveness rather than reducing it” (p. 35). Thirdly, political parties may enhance government responsiveness to public opinion when considering the party balance (again, the author warns us to interpret data cautiously), possibly because one side is trying to gain more supporters in the legislature, requiring them to increase their receptiveness to public opinion in an effort to more effectively win over the votes of the representatives from the constituencies benefiting from this newly crafted policy. This allows for a win-win situation

between the political party in question and the public, which stands to gain from its increased importance, though sometimes it may only be temporary. And finally, in spite of the Elitism Theory, public opinion still trumps private interests when an issue gains relevancy and becomes more important nationwide, garnering enough attention to the extent that the government now has to prioritize responding in a manner that resonates positively with the public instead of catering to the elites, lest they risk backlash, which may or may not harm their approval ratings as well as their next electoral performance.

### Public Opinion from the Official’s Perspective

Now, as we approach the question of “to what extent does public opinion affect policy pertaining to the Global War on Terror,” we have to recall the nature of the American government: the voices of the people are, in theory, echoed by their representatives, of whom they elect. This should allow for the Federal Government to be as responsive to public opinion as possible. It can be hypothesized that as the nation receives information on the progression of the war through various forms of media, the citizenry either reacts with approval or disapproval. The citizens then proceed to reflect their views in their respective congressional districts to their representatives, and since the war is such a salient issue, whenever new information about its progression inevitably rears its head, it will simply become impossible to ignore. Therefore, representatives will be compelled to reflect their constituent’s views in Congress by either casting their vote for or against war legislation according to the sentiments voiced by their electoral district. Otherwise, they run the risk of giving their electoral opponents more angles of attack and possibly losing their current seat should the citizens of their congressional district decide that they are not suitable to represent them in Congress. In the words of Chan & Safran (2006), “Politicians in a democracy understand that they will have to be elected in order to retain political power. Therefore, they refrain from alienating or offending their constituents because they do not want to be sanctioned by the voters in the next election” (p. 139).

This same situation can hence be reasonably expected to apply to all other democratically elected representatives, whether in the House of Representatives or the Senate, which would allow Congress as a democratic institution to be “maximally responsive” towards public opinion, with the public opinion from each congressional district being reflected in the voting decisions regarding major decisions leading up to and during the Global War on Terror, such as the vote on the Authorization for Use of Military Force Against Iraq Resolution of 2002. Naturally, this logic should also be able to be applied to the highest office of American politics—the President of the United States—with similar implications. Only this time, instead of a small locality, they “must address a national electorate” (Chan & Safran, 2006, p. 147), maintaining a delicate balance between party lines and public opinion. In line with what the previous results of Burstein (2003) suggest, Chan & Safran (2006) argue that although public opinion is still important, “it would be unwarranted to simply assume



that public opinion would have a direct and undifferentiated impact on the politicians' electoral incentives regardless of the nature of rules governing political contest in their respective country" (p. 140), which is also a point that Burstein (2003) acknowledges and takes into account. They believe that how an elected representative perceives their current political situation influences to what extent their decisions reflect public opinion, of which the perception highly depends on how the electoral system operates, or in their own words, "the political salience and relevance of public opinion depends ultimately on the incumbent politicians' concern for the voters being mobilized by the opposition" (p. 154), which includes considerations for the party balance, as mentioned by Burstein (2003), where the slimmer the majority, the more inclined a party will be to take into consideration public opinion to win over as many congresspeople as possible, where public opinion was said to be important 48% of the time in comparison to 22% of the time when party balance is excluded. This "concern," in turn, has been argued to be dependent on how a country's electoral system operates. Where, in comparison to democracies with proportional representation in their legislatures that can afford their citizenry a wide selection of political parties, offering varying platforms that may cater to the public's sentiment at a given time, the electoral system of the United States is mostly restricted to two major political parties—the Democrats and the Republicans. This political development, known as "political polarization," devolved American elections into a simple question of whether or not the opposing party can provide a substantially different alternative platform that would otherwise suit the public interest better than the current war-related policies enacted by the incumbent government. "Absent this potential, they have less incentive to adjust their unpopular policies" (Chan & Safran, 2006); this means that although the incentive to change is not eliminated entirely, should such a situation occur where both parties have the same agenda and offer similar policies, the extent to which the dissenting opinion and public opinion as a whole affect the policy-making process is limited due to the lack of viable alternatives. Any vote for another party with the desired platform, which in this case is likely smaller with fewer supporters, will be "wasted" since the two largest parties have significantly more resources and a substantially larger voter base to count on. As a result, they are forced to choose between the lesser of two evils "in the hope of defeating the candidate or party that is most objectionable to them" (p. 154). A notable example of such an occurrence would be the action taken by the American government pertaining to policy on Iraq. Although there was a considerable amount of opposition towards authorizing military action against Iraq in the form of a ground invasion, with about 40 percent (p. 145) of the electorate being against such a decision, the American government passed the "Authorization for the Use of Military Force Against Iraq Resolution 2002" regardless, as the general sentiment was still that *something* had to be done in response to September 11th. Sacrificing the views of the substantial minority in order to please the majority, Congress passed the resolution with 296 votes in favor compared to 133 against in the House of Representatives, and in the Senate, 77 votes in favor versus 23 votes against ("Actions—H.J.Res.114—107th Congress," 2002).

The limitation on the influence of public opinion does not last long; however, as in modern democracies, it is the general trend that the party with the most unpopular policies associated with them is ousted by means of electoral defeat should they fail to convince the electorate that they will do better. And despite whatever mutual alignment the two parties may have initially, public opinion cannot and will not be ignored forever due to the nature of the American electoral system, which throughout recent history has constituted a two-party rivalry between the Democrats and Republicans. There will inevitably be a divergence in policy platforms as the war progresses; most relevant is the fact that with war, "presidential popularity declines proportionately with mounting casualties" (Chan & Safran, 2006, p. 139), with one side being forced to defend their mistakes as the war drags on and the other capitalizing on the opportunity to mount a political offensive, mobilizing public opinion through attacking high expenditures and troop casualties. This situation was evidenced by the occurrence of the 2008 Financial Crisis, which gained salience to the American public at that time, requiring more attention be directed towards domestic affairs rather than the ongoing, and very costly, intervention in Iraq. The Democrats, capitalizing on the public's waning confidence in and support for the war effort, presented a platform that aimed to completely withdraw American troops from the region with a concrete deadline, contrasting with what the Republicans proposed, which was to maintain American military presence in Iraq—a highly unpopular stance, reflected by a nationwide survey conducted by Pew Research Center, where those who believed that the War in Iraq was the right decision fell to about 38% in 2008, whereas those of the opposite opinion saw an increase to upwards of 50% (Doherty & Kiley, 2003).

### On the Attempts in Counterterrorism

Keeping in mind the way in which third-party influences may have impacted the weight of public opinion during decision-making, and what the results show thus far, it can be concluded that public opinion does have influence over policy decisions, and its impact mostly remains unhampered by elites and interest groups. However, it is often challenged by the American two-party system, which affects an official's perception of the importance of public opinion, often increasing when the ruling party holds only a slim majority over the opposition. Now, putting into perspective the Global War on Terror and its beginnings, it is important to review one crucial aspect that even now is a major concern of the American people: counterterrorism policy. Ever since the September 11th attacks, which served as the justification for the War in Iraq and the broader Global War on Terror, the American public has understandably been traumatized and, as a result, has become "the primary driver behind the extensive and excessive counterterrorism efforts undertaken since 9/11" (Mueller & Stewart, 2018). This is a similar, but not an exact replica, of the mood at the time of the Pearl Harbor attacks, only this time the enemy was nearly invisible. Instead of one cohesive nation-state like Japan during the Second World War that had definite territorial boundaries and centers of power, the United States' new enemy used unconventional tactics to target civilian populations and, worst of all, possesses no physical

territory whatsoever, with the exception of the Islamic State during the height of their power. Possession of territory and centers of power (like Mosul) proved to be their downfall. Such an enemy served to create great fear and paranoia among the American populace, where Mueller & Stewart (2018) described the occurrence as “routinized mass anxiety” that has caused a perpetual “false sense of insecurity,” enabled, in part, by high amounts of media coverage on the *plot* instead of *reality*. This means that despite terrorist operations being thwarted, what the public absorbed instead was the *planned result*, ambitious acts that targeted key American infrastructure and cultural symbols. This could partially explain why the public is insistent on high expenditures for counterterrorism to assuage their overblown fear. The authors found that such fear experiences spikes in the aftermath of a major terrorist event, such as that of the September 11th Attack, and experiences two possible trends. First, after the major terrorist event, public fear will experience “a decline by the end of the year with little change afterward” (Mueller & Stewart, 2018), meaning that fear will still remain largely unchanged until it spikes again when another terrorist event happens. Or, second, “levels of concern measured at the time of the attacks simply continued, remaining at much the same level over the subsequent decade and a half” (Mueller & Stewart, 2018), exemplified by the fact that even though Osama Bin Laden, thought to be the central coordinator of the September 11th attacks, had been killed, public fear “a decade later [...] stood at almost the exact same level as in October 2001” (Mueller & Stewart, 2018). This has created a situation where “officials and elites [...] more nearly responding to public fear than creating it” (Mueller & Stewart, 2018), and since the general atmosphere demanded that *some* degree of action be taken, in 2002, regardless of whether or not the *casus belli* was founded on solid evidence, Congress authorized the use of military force against Iraq, presumably in an attempt to assuage public fear and show tangible successes in the form of the capture of territory and key officials belonging to the Ba’athist government, but the confidence boosters such successes provided proved to be short-lived, as “any boost in public confidence and decline in fear evaporated within a few months” (Mueller & Stewart, 2018). Even when unexpected incidents like the whistleblowing of Edward Snowden occurred, the authors found that although the general opinion was that the “government had gone too far in restricting civil liberties and intruding on privacy” in the months following, after the rise of ISIS, public opinion had gone back to the prior consensus: more “demand for coercive policies” (Mueller & Stewart, 2018). This trend would continue, and the paper found that despite the occasional spikes in public fear towards ISIS and other terror groups whenever a major attack happened, quoting the aftermaths of the London bombings in 2005 as well as the unsuccessful attempt by the underwear bomber in 2009, “the percentage of Americans who counted terrorism as the country’s most important problem’ has not registered above 20% since 2002” (Mueller & Stewart, 2018), where other issues gained more salience as time went on, such as the 2008 Financial Crisis. But even though most Americans do not consider terrorism to be the most salient issue any longer, and in spite of the fact that the “probability that an American will be killed by a terrorist (whether Islamist or not) in the United States [...]

something like one in 50 million per year” (Mueller & Stewart, 2018) pales in comparison to deaths by homicide, automobile accidents, drowning in a bathtub, and by an “accident-causing deer,” “some 40% of the public continues to say when polled that they worry that they or a family member will become a terrorist victim, a number that has scarcely changed since late 2001” (Mueller & Stewart, 2018). When faced with such irrational fear, and when taking into account that “anxiety may also derive from the perception that Muslim extremist terrorists [...] seem to be out to kill more or less at random” (Mueller & Stewart 2018), the government has no choice but to match public opinion with higher expenditures in counterterrorism policies due to the fact that the government now has to cover as many bases as possible, owing to the “special formlessness [...] of terrorism’s hostile foreign referent.” It has become increasingly difficult for the government to prove that the formless enemy has been definitively defeated (Mueller & Stewart, 2018). The result of such a predicament is a counterterrorism budget amounting to over \$1 trillion in expenses, and several times that on conflicts fought with the justification to eradicate terrorism (Mueller & Stewart, 2018), with the trend set to continue along with a slew of policies that increase policing and surveillance “if they can convincingly be associated with the quest to stamp out terrorists who might have America in their sights” (Mueller & Stewart, 2018). To address concerns relating to elite interference, the paper stated that although leaders and elites may put policy up for consideration, it is still up to the public to decide whether or not they want to accept the justification for it, and when they do, it should be assumed that such a policy has struck a “responsive chord” (Mueller & Stewart, 2018), which is in agreement with previous literature stating that public opinion remains undiminished despite special interests and elite interaction with the government.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the impact of public opinion on policy during the Global War on Terrorism is, at the moment, unable to be properly quantified due to the lack of universalization in measuring the extent to which public opinion affects policy concerning the Global War on Terrorism. After reviewing the relevant literature, it can be reasonably deduced that public opinion does indeed have a substantial impact, with the extent of its influence often influenced by: Firstly, despite public opinion having been proven to have occasionally encountered interruptions by third parties attempting to push separate agendas, and despite what conventional theory—such as that of the Elitism Theory—may suggest about the impediment of the public’s sway over policy-making by elites, the military-industrial complex, and so on, the weight of public opinion during policy considerations largely remained unchanged. Secondly, the importance of a certain issue addressed by said policies towards the public at any given point in time plays a large role in determining whether or not officials will consider public opinion during the process, whereas as time goes on, when the issue becomes increasingly irrelevant, although not entirely forgotten, in face of larger issues, the public will likely demand that resources be allocated elsewhere. Thus, as public attention is diverted away from the policies at hand regarding the Global War on Terrorism (GWOT) to matters of

increasing relevance, such as addressing the 2008 Financial Crisis, officials will consult less with public opinion when deciding on matters related to the GWOT. Finally, a politician's perception of the importance of public opinion also plays a key role in whether or not the voices of the public will be echoed in policy decisions, and whether such elected officials will be receptive towards public opinion is highly dependent on, firstly, whether or not the politician seeks re-election, and should they not be seeking re-election, the politician is less likely to put public opinion into substantial consideration as there are fewer repercussions. Secondly, the party balance, or the distribution of seats in Congress. The slimmer the congressional majority is, the more likely a politician is inclined to consider public opinion and find a middle ground to gain as much support as possible, as opposed to a situation when there is either a large majority or when both parties are proposing similar policies, as seen in the months following September 11th.

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